

Back Again, Back Again: Futures to Fight For

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode seventeen: Futures to Fight For.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

That evening, Callia sought me out for the first time. She'd sent Nat to find us — I'd been busy helping Leander ease into camp with new clothing, with a place to sleep, with people to lean on. I'd found them clothing similar to the sort that Callia and I wore, functional pants and thick boots and a loose shirt. However, draped around their shoulders, still, was the quilted vest they'd been wearing before the Fretim.

It was a little more ragged than how I remembered it in the taverns and the festival. It was now stained with what, after it had dried, could have passed for mud.

It wasn't, of course. They'd been right by Silas when she'd died.

The two of us had scrubbed at it late that afternoon – we'd collapsed after getting back at dawn, dead-tired and too shaken up to be useful otherwise – down by the stream where we always washed all our clothes and bathed. Rhia had been there, a big basket of laundry at her side, and she'd offered a bar of soap, and her board, and kind words, pitched so low they were for Leander alone. She'd taken to doing laundry, something peaceful and useful and calm, when she was worried. She'd asked me, both of us kneeling over the water – *is he dead?*

She said it in English – *he* was unquestioningly *Cassian*. I swallowed down a bit of bile and said, carefully, *he will be soon*. Rhia nodded at that, then, after hesitating, dropped her things onto the shore and flung her arms around me. I squeezed her back, hard, and pressed my face into her shoulder.

I'm glad you are okay, she said. *I'm glad you both came home*.

You were right, I whispered. *It was a trap – was meant to be a trap. For me*.

But you chose us. It seemed to take more than she'd expected to say those words – they used up all the air in her lungs. *I'm glad you chose us*.

I didn't need to tell her the lengths I'd gone to to keep Cassian away from the palace long enough for most of the raid to

take place. I didn't need to tell her that I hadn't even used the speech, that she was right, that he hadn't listened. I didn't need to tell her that he'd let me go, but I did, all of it, the story spilling out, because I was tired of secrets between us.

Her fingers curled in mine, nails scraping at my palms, but she listened all the way through. *As long as it is done*, she said. *For good. Whatever there was between you and him.*

I laughed. It came out a little bitterly despite myself. *The next time we meet, I think it will be to the death. Whether or not I want it.*

And that was where Nat found us, Leander scrubbing at their vest, Rhia and I steadily making our way through the pile of dirty clothes. She gathered the both of us up and deposited us at her tent before flitting off, where, inside, Callia hunched over a book on the table. Callia did not move to cover them when I entered, did not throw out an arm to tell us to wait outside, did not snap at me to *stop spying, aestas, go find something useful to do that is not mouth-breathing down my neck*. She looked up and it was the closest thing I'd ever seen to *warmth*, directed at me the same way she directed it at every other person at this camp that she loved. She said, slowly, *Leander Feldrea. I am glad you are okay and I am sorry that you nearly died over an old story.*

They crinkled their mouth into something like a smile. *I do not think it is just a story, capitan.*

Callia laughed, a short, barking thing. *I am starting to think the same.* Her gaze flicked to me. *Ilyaas.*

Ilyaas. Ilyaas, Ilyaas, Ilyaas. My name in her mouth. Not *Rex tyrannus* or *aestas* or *eligidida*. *Ilyaas. Ilyaas.*

Capitan, I said, careful, trying not to let my heart skip. Her eyes were level looking in mine, endless and reflective gold.

Callia, she corrected. *You know my name. Stop being afraid.*

I smiled, the smallest bit. *Callia.*

Rex et poeta et soldat, she said by way of response. *Is it the three of us?*

Leander fiddled with the cuffs of their shirt, pulling them straight and straighter and straighter. *Do you really have to ask? Do you not see how they lean in and look to you to lead them, Callia? Ilyaas has a sword. I have a voice. We are magic, the three of us.*

Here it was, this thing I had been searching for for – nearly a year. Three-days-until-it-had-been-a-year. *Rex et poeta et soldat. Rex et poeta et soldat.*

Magic – there was still the faintest hint of scorn to Callia's voice at that word, but it was almost scrubbed out – *isn't any good unless we use it.* She beckoned us over to the

table, clambering from the wobbly stool to stand beside us. She flipped the book so it faced towards us.

Leander ducked their head toward their chin and ran a finger along the rough edges of the book, catching on loose pages and tabs and bits of ribbon color-coded for a purpose far beyond me. I peered around their shoulder. It took a minute for the Rhysean to make sense in my head - especially when it wasn't in Rhia's clean, rounded letters.

What we want, it read. It used the inclusive *we*, *niltim*, *you-and-I-and-all* else. A word of solidarity - meaning, *we will change this for good and we will change it together*.

I know what I want, she said. *I know what I have worked towards since I could walk. I know the dreams that were passed to me to keep alive. I want to stop seeing my people starve. I want them to stop breaking their backs to lift the laerds and the kings. I want to finish burning the castle*.

Leander picked at one of the ribbons. *I want to stop seeing children made soldiers*, they said. *I want to stop making people tithes*.

I hesitated, but only for a second. It that I was trying to hide any part of myself from them. It was me, trying to gather my words. Trying to be the truest version of myself - which meant I had to not rush into it heart over head. *I want to see the magic reawakened*. I thought of Silas, of the pyre I'd lit,

of all the times I'd gone back to the castle smelling like smoke and death and the destruction of other people's futures. *I - I don't want anyone else to burn. I want there to be futures to fight for.*

Callia nodded. Leander smiled - I caught their hand and wrapped my fingers through theirs, smiling back, and even as their sleeve jerked up, golden blood golden veins, they did not flinch and they did not run.

This world, remade, Callia said. Our country, but what it could be. Futures to fight for.

She let out a long breath - somehow, it seemed like more air than could ever have fit into her lungs. *We will need support. But it could happen. It could. It could.*

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Abigail, as the outro: Back Again, Back Again is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving a review on your podcast platform of choice or supporting Back Again, Back Again on Patreon at patreon.com/backagainpodcast, where you'll gain access to bloopers, annotated transcripts, episode sneak-peeks, and more.

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If you've made it this far, thanks for sticking around. Please remember that you do not have to fill your days with action and creation to be worthy of the space you take up. You were made already whole.

The light-soaked days are coming. I promise. I hope you have a wonderful day.